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OBSOLETE TEACHINGS OF OWEN JONES.

BY LEWIS F. DAY.

It would be difficult to over-estimate the good that was done in its day by the publication of Owen Jones' "Grammar of Ornament." The book itself is, indeed, the product of several co-operators, and no one man deserves the whole credit of it; and it may, perhaps, be urged that it rather marked a distinct period in the progress of ornamental art, than inaugurated it. It is quite certain, too, that the work is not a grammar, and has no claim whatever to the title. Still, the principles of Owen Jones are his own—even when they reflect the teaching of Oriental masters. They are indeed much more his principles than the principles of ornament. As an expression of the laws which govern ornament they are most inadequate. It is long, since decorators accepted them as binding on the artist; and it is time that some one said, outright, how trivial they are. It is not denied that they have done great good in correcting the public taste, and encouraging a very wholesome and much needed restraint in ornament; but their insufficiency is pretty clearly proved by the fact that, practically, they are already obsolete.

Of the thirty-eight propositions laid down by Owen Jones, there are few, if any, that we can accept without reserve. Even where the proposition consists of a simple definition it is not always accurate.

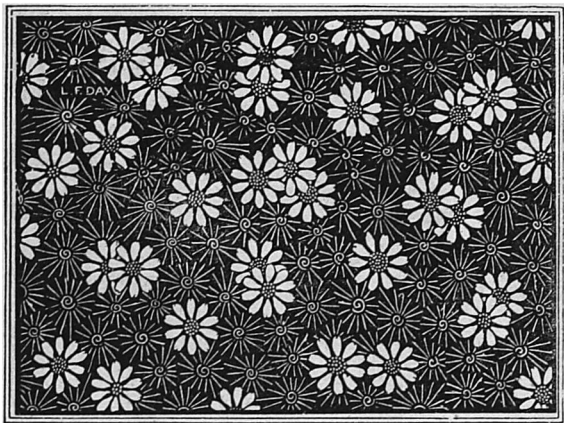
Prop. 1, for example, declares that the "Decorative Arts arise from, and should properly be attendant upon, architecture." Is that strictly true? Or must we exclude the arts of weaving, goldsmith's work, and dress, from the title of decoration?

Prop. 2, is an attempt to define architecture, and has not much to do with the subject.

In Prop. 3, it is asserted, that "all works of the decorative arts should possess fitness, proportion, harmony, the result of all which, is repose." That is true enough, so far as it goes, but it scarcely includes all that is needful to decorative art, or to repose.

The 4th Prop. declares, that "true beauty results from that repose which the mind feels when the eye, the intellect, and the affections are satisfied from the absence of any want." At best this is rather a negative sort of beauty. But surely there is much "true beauty" with which "the intellect" and "the affections" have nothing whatever to do. The perception of visible beauty is through the senses, not through the mind.

Prop. 5 is substantially correct, "Construction should be decorated." Decoration should never be purposely constructed. The logic of the corollary is, however, somewhat curious: "That which is beautiful is true—that which is true must be beautiful." It is much as if it had been said: Man is an animal, whatever, therefore, is animal must be a man.



DAISY DIAPER.

The assertion in Prop. 6, that "Beauty of form is produced by lines growing out, one from the other in gradual undulations," leaves us to suppose, as does the ornament designed by Owen Jones, that herein lies the whole secret of lineal beauty. The truth is that those same gradual undulations lead also to effeminacy and pretty-pretty, and betoken a general lack of backbone. All beauty is not undulating, and in the forms of moresque art which Owen Jones imitated, we get so sick of gradual undulations that we would welcome even an occasional excrescence, as affording some variety to the monotony of sweetness. What would have become of the energy of mediæval metal work, if the undulating principle had been obeyed by the smiths of the middle ages?

Prop. 7 is true enough, but trite.

To accept the assertion in Prop. 8, that "all ornament should be based upon a geometrical construction," would be to impose a most unnecessary restriction upon the artist. A geometric basis is often most useful in design; but it is not indispensable. Witness the ornament of the Japanese and the arabesques of the Italian cinque-centists. My daisy diaper, here shown, is an illustration of a design in which it is a distinct advantage to be quit of the geometric basis altogether—from the artist's point of view, that is to say: The manufacturer who has to reproduce a design, mechanically, must, of course, have a geometrical repeat.

Again in Prop. 9, which deals with the subject of proportion, we have the doubtful dogma, that "the whole, and each particular member, should be a multiple of some simple unit." No doubt proportion should be observed in every work of art; but the "units" have nothing in the world to do with it. An artist does not create by the foot-rule. He *feels* when his proportion is right. The utmost that can be said for this proposition is that it may be a useful "tip" to a mechanical decorator; but it is no more. The note about "ratios" amounts in effect to another good "tip," which is; Don't let your dodges be too obvious.

Prop. 10 is another definition which does not help us far on our way.

In Prop. 11, we have once more a rule derived from Oriental practice. It is a good rule and a safe one. No doubt every line that belongs to the growth of an ornamental design should be traceable to its root; that is no more than conscientiousness requires of us; but it is not necessary that "in surface decoration *all* lines should grow out of a parent stem."



DIAGRAM B.

Prop. 12 goes further in the same direction, and is still less to be accepted as it stands. It may be "in accordance with Oriental practice," that "all junctions of curved lines with curved, or of curved lines with straight should be tangential to each other;" but it is *not* a "natural law." Nature is too strong and sturdy by half, to be afraid of a sharp angle. And if by neglecting this so-called principle we lose some softness, we get full compensation in the shape of character that is not Oriental and suave.

In his hatred of the florid forms of "natural" ornament, which Owen Jones did so much to depose from popular favor, he went too far in his prohibition of natural forms in ornament. It was a distinct demerit in his eyes, whenever and wherever an ornamental form resembled nature.

And in Prop. 13, which deals with the conventional representation of natural forms, he recognizes no difference, whatever, in the degrees of naturalness permissible under different circumstances. His very narrowness in this respect served him, perhaps, in good stead in the crusade against the kind of naturalism that he had to overthrow; but it should not be allowed to limit the scope of men who see in nature much that will serve their purpose in ornament.

With Prop. 14 begin the rules about color. That "color is used to assist in the development of form, and to distinguish objects, or parts of objects, one from another," is true, but black and white would do that even more effectually, as they would also more effectually "assist light and shade," which is set forth in Prop. 15 as a further use of color. Color is at least as useful in softening as in developing form. Practically, the use of color is to qualify or rectify form, softening what is too pronounced, and strengthening what is weak. But an artist uses color for its own sake. In my diagram B, color is used as a means of putting into the background, that portion of the ornament which is secondary to the more important scroll. By this means it is possible to get richer and more broken color, without too much interfering with the main lines of the design.

I have also given diagram C, as an illustration in which the old Gothic glass painters used color of the way to blur the form, instead of defining it. It would have been much more to the purpose

to have told the student in Prop. 15, something of the effect of light and shade upon color.

In Prop. 16, we learn that the secret of color lies in the discreet use of the primaries "in small quantities, balanced on the secondary and tertiary colors in larger masses."

Prop. 17, explains where the primaries and where the secondaries and tertiaries should be used, and Prop. 18, gives receipts for color, without a scale to measure by. The eye is the true scale, and wants no "equivalents." This theory of primary colors is a fallacy, and every artist will admit as much: No theory of color can ever be of much use, and no one with anything of the color sense in him imagines that it can. If there is any dogmatism possible on the subject, it is that the primaries are poisonous, and must be administered in infinitesimal doses. The Arabs felt this, and so did Owen Jones, dimly, when he insisted upon the more open method of breaking up bright colors with lines and interspaces of black, white and gold; but if Owen Jones ever had an eye for harmonious color, he poisoned it by the undue indulgence in primaries.

Prop. 20, is a useful receipt, perhaps, but not a "principle" merely; nor is Prop. 19.

Prop. 21, is only an application of the theory of primary colors to the rule enunciated in Prop. 14. As Owen Jones applied it, to the decoration of moldings, it is opposed to the practice of ancient Greeks and Romans, no less than of Gothic and Renaissance artists, all of whom were wont to break the monotony of parallel lines by curved or colored ornament *crossing* them. The simple and familiar alternation of differently colored *voussoirs* in an arch, is infinitely to be preferred to the stringy lines of moldings, colored according to the convexity or concavity of their section.

The rule embodied in Prop. 22, that "the various colors should be so blended that the object colored, when viewed from a distance, should present a neutralized bloom," is a capital one so far as backgrounds are concerned. But in more important decorative features some emphasis is to be desired, not merely a neutralized bloom.

Again, if it were necessary to dogmatize, it would be better to contradict flatly Prop. 23. Unless we are to use the primaries in all their crudity—which Heaven forbid!—we can scarcely fail to admit something of each of them in whatever we paint, but, so far from the primaries being necessary, those combinations are as a rule most pleasing in which one of the primaries appears to be suppressed.

Prop. 24 states a fact which Chevreul had stated before.

Other facts, equally obvious, are stated in Props. 25, 26, 27.

In asserting, in Prop. 28, that "colors should never be allowed to impinge upon each other," the author mistakes a caution necessary to a poor colorist, for a law of art.

Prop. 29 is again only a trick of the decorator's trade, not a law at all.

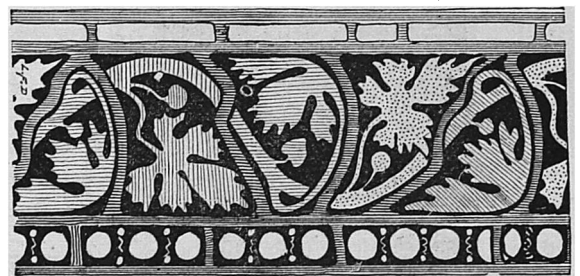


DIAGRAM C.

In Props. 30 and 31 it would have been better to say "may be," instead of "should be" "separated" or "outlined." Propositions 30, 31, 32 and 33 would then have been at least useful hints to the student. The advantage of the expedients proposed is tolerably obvious.

Not quite so obvious is the advantage of obedience to Prop. 34.

Prop. 35 justifies the imitation of wood, marble and the like, "only when the employment of the thing imitated would not have been inconsistent." It is just there that they are *least* to be endured, for it is there that they are at once most pretentious and most likely to deceive us. That "the principles discernable in the works of the past belong to us" (Prop. 36) is true enough. Yet we may admit that the author has fairly stated the rules which the Moors consciously or unconsciously obeyed, without acknowledging that those are, indeed, "the principles of ornament."

The allusion to "general principles," in Prop. 37 makes one disposed to say: First, find your general principles.

One is tempted, also, to add a 38th commandment, and say: Be grateful for your Owen Jones, but don't swallow his principles whole.